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UNCLAS DUBLIN 000811

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: Despite the Rumors, Irish PM Ahern Not  
Likely as the Next President of the EU  
Commission

1. (SBU) Summary: European and Irish media have labeled Irish PM Ahern a front runner for the EU Commission president. Ahern, one of the EU's longest serving PMs, has won wide approval for his management thus far of the EU Presidency, and his profile in Europe has never been higher. However, Ahern has, on more than one occasion, ruled himself out of the running, and we believe him when he says he will not move to Brussels. Current European Parliament president (and Irishman) Pat Cox is not seen here as emerging as a compromise choice. End Summary.

Ahern's EU Star In The Ascendancy

2. (SBU) When Europe's media focused on Ireland for the May 1st accession celebrations, PM Bertie Ahern's name first cropped up as a candidate for the post of EU Commission president. (Commission President Romano Prodi will step down from his job in October 2004.) Rumors in the Irish media spread when the Financial Times Germany (May 13), weighed in with a profile of Ahern, emphasizing his legendary powers of negotiation and stating how this would qualify him for the role of Commission president. The "Times" of London followed suit.

3. (SBU) In many respects, Ahern would be an ideal candidate. He has rolled up his sleeves over the past five months and thrown himself into the job of President of the European Council, successfully defusing intra-EU friction from the previous Presidency, overseeing the smooth accession of 10 new EU members, and generating optimism on concluding the IGC and agreeing a constitutional treaty by the June 16-17 EU Summit. He has a wealth of EU knowledge from his position as one of the longest-serving EU leaders, and an Irish Commission President should be broadly acceptable to larger states like Germany and France. Ahern also enjoys an excellent personal relationship with British PM Blair, forged in the Northern Ireland peace process.

But There's No Place Like Home

4. (SBU) However, when asked by a leader of one of the opposition parties in the Parliament on May 19 whether he would be seeking the position of President of the Commission, Ahern responded with a very definite "no." A savvy political operator, Ahern might well be playing coy were it not for the fact that Ahern is very much a domestic political animal. Until now, he has kept foreign travel to a minimum throughout his public life -- so much so, there are stories of Ahern traveling long and late to return to Dublin for the night. Although a committed European, he has never immersed himself in EU politics, prior to the Presidency. Nor does he speak French; he is a genuine "old boy" from north Dublin, with a distinct accent (in English and in Irish) to match. Most observers bet that Ahern will seek another five-year term as PM in the next general election in 2007. While hard to predict now, Ahern's coalition would have a real chance at a third term, if the economic upswing continues.

If Not Bertie, Who?

5. (SBU) When asked, Ahern stated that the GOI could well support the candidature of outgoing European Parliament President Pat Cox, or any Irish candidate who could demonstrate that s/he had the support of other member states. It was a clever formulation in response. As EU President, Ireland is not supposed to lobby for any candidate. We note, however, that Cox, an Independent MEP, is not close to Ahern's Fianna Fail party. Instead, Ahern is likely to nominate a serving cabinet minister, possibly Finance minister Charlie McCreevy, as

Ireland's next Commissioner.

KENNY